

Testing Our “Intuitions”:
Pragmatist Deconstruction of Our Cartesian Inheritance

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We distinguish between tenable and untenable beliefs, licit and illicit actions, meaningful and meaningless doubts, fruitful and sterile questions – and, indeed, we draw countless distinctions of this character. To focus upon but one of these distinctions, we take ourselves and others to be *justified* in holding some beliefs (e.g., that the Earth is a spherical object) but not others (e.g., that the Earth is flat). We say, for example, that we are justified in believing p because we have perceived p , but what justifies the belief that perception in such cases provides a sufficient warrant for belief? In the face of persistent, complex challenges we try to justify not only specific beliefs but also the general grounds upon which and the general procedures by which such beliefs are justified (or taken to be justified).

Due to the pressures of such challenges, we are forced to reflect on the possibility of justifying our practices of justification. Reflection thus becomes

formally and explicitly reflexive, but in doing so we quickly begin to feel that we have become lost in a hall of mirrors. As Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, however, justification must come to an end *somewhere*. But not anywhere will suffice. The grounds to which we appeal when trying to justify our beliefs cannot themselves be arbitrary or contingent, for then our beliefs appear to be ultimately groundless, i.e., unjustified.

The awareness that our beliefs are groundless would destroy the conviction with which we hold these beliefs. The awareness that our critiques have been arbitrarily curtailed would force us to consider that we are more dogmatic than we are willing to acknowledge. On the one hand, critique (especially when it assumes a relentlessly reflexive form) tends to undermine the basis of our convictions. As Nietzsche advised, “A very popular error: having the courage of one’s convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an *attack* on one’s convictions!!” “Universal truths” come to be seen as local prejudices, “necessary principles” as contingent dicta. On the other hand, our convictions (especially when they assume a resolutely passionate form) tend to preclude the possibility of a sufficiently deep-cutting critique. Thus the dilemma of a skepticism fatal to conviction and a dogmatism invulnerable to criticism seems to entrap us.¹ But the hope persists that we might yet find a basis for our convictions that is, at the same time, a critically secured (rather than

dogmatically claimed) standpoint. The intellectual self-image of most of us requires that we do not settle for either the pose of the uncommitted skeptic or the figure of the dogmatic advocate. The possibility of a *via media* however eludes us.

Perhaps our traditional “intuitions” about what is required for rational critique and critical justification compel us to return, time and again, to the same juncture, with each path leading to an impasse. Perhaps Wittgenstein captures our predicament when he suggests that: “A person caught in a philosophical confusion is like a man who wants to get out but doesn’t know how. He tries the window but it is too high. He tries the chimney but it is too narrow. And if he would only *turn around*, he would see that the door has been open all the time!” (Quoted in Norman Malcolm’s *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, p. 51). I take pragmatism, properly understood (not of course polemically caricatured), to be an attempt to turn around, but one requiring us to turn away from the luring prospect of escaping our problem via an appeal to intuitions. Before contrasting pragmatism with intuitionism, however, it is necessary to suggest how intuitionism has attained its hold over us (“A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” [*Philosophical Investigations*, I, #115]).

Our inherited conceptions of human knowledge tend, under a variety of guises, to conform to a strikingly similar pattern. The guises might be those of architecturally, geologically, or otherwise derived metaphors. The pattern underlying these metaphors is that of privileged beliefs serving a crucial epistemic function, that of justifying our acceptance of other beliefs. The justifying beliefs might be construed as foundational, or as the densely sedimented, though slowly shifting, banks of a river, or the center of a web open, in principle, to alteration but, in practice, very rarely altered in comparison with the periphery of the web. The initially incredible can be rendered, at least, provisionally credible on the basis of the (putatively) indubitable. The image of a foundation (Descartes), a riverbank (Wittgenstein), or a web (Quine) allows one to draw a crucial distinction, albeit with dramatically different emphases: some beliefs *call for* justification, whereas other ones *rule out* the possibility of justification.

It is understandable why this pattern is so persistent and pervasive. Part of the reason for this is that (a) our theories have, however remotely, evolved out of *our practices of justifying* our epistemic claims; (b) our practices of epistemic justification ineluctably try to secure the truth of the more dubious in reference to the less dubious; and (c) the process of securing adequate grounds for our epistemic claims has tended to take the form of a process of securing *indubitable*

foundations for the edifice of human knowledge. One traditional “intuition” then is that some beliefs are well-grounded while others are not. To ground a dubious claim in equally or (even more absurdly) more deeply dubious claims is simply not an effective strategy of epistemic justification. But the underlying image of epistemic justification is architectural: to ground a belief is to secure a foundation for that belief. Evidence is something one builds upon, one’s edifice being only as stable as one’s foundations are solid. To characterize a belief as groundless is, in most instances, not to pay that belief a compliment. Apparently influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger did try to exhibit the abysmal character of human practices, including those preoccupied with the acquisition of knowledge. All of our efforts to ground our practices must be undertaken in the face of their ultimate groundlessness (cf. Rorty).

As a protection against the vertigo felt when the image of an abyss opening beneath the most solid epistemic foundations takes hold of the philosophical imagination (Wittgenstein), the quest for apodictic certainty seems to be the course of responsible inquiry. Apart from grounds themselves not deemed groundless, how are we to justify our epistemic claims? Apart from such grounds, how can we with sufficient confidence proclaim any belief to be well-grounded? To demand of *any* epistemic grounds a justification in terms of more secure grounds unleashes an infinite regress having the unacceptable

consequences that the distinction between well-grounded and groundless beliefs is *ultimately* a distinction without a difference. For, in the final analysis, all beliefs are groundless.

Another traditional “intuition” comes into play at this juncture: not all demands for justification are well-grounded. The reason that they are not is this: nothing more secure or indubitable can, either in principle or in practice, be found than the beliefs for which justification is being demanded. The regress is stopped since one is forced to admit that there are beliefs that cannot reasonably (some would say more strongly, that cannot intelligibly) be called into question. Justification *must* end somewhere (Wittgenstein). There is a point at which the justification of the grounds of the grounds, etc., of our beliefs is silly or pointless or misguided or in some other way untoward.

But the *nature* of that which cannot be questioned, of that beyond which reasonable requests for epistemic justification cannot go, may be interpreted variously. One way to interpret the justifying grounds that do not themselves need to be justified is to take these grounds to be, in principle, indubitable. Another way is to conceive them as what in practice ought not to be doubted, for there is no specific, contextual reason to doubt them. There are no doubt other ways of interpreting such grounds, but for our purposes I will limit myself to these two.

Intuitionists are committed to the position that, at bottom, there are self-warranting intuitions that alone provide adequate epistemic foundations for our discursive cognitive claims. Some truths are known through other truths, while other truths are known in themselves (they are, in a traditional expression, said to be *nota per se*). *Discursus* is a process of running about, hence one taking time and effort (Pieper 1952: 24-29). It is, for the most part, the characteristic manner in which human beings come to discover truth. But not every truth is known through other truths: some truths are grasped immediately. Intuitive knowledge is one of the principal names for such immediate apprehension. As the word itself suggests, such knowing is the effect of a kind of seeing (Pieper 25). In contrast to discursive knowledge, intuitive knowledge tends to carry the connotation of an instantaneous and effortless act.² It may take time, training and maturation to be in the position of immediately apprehending some truth, but the apprehension itself occurs in a flash. That it may take time, training, maturation, etc. to apprehend immediately some truth means that such apprehension is a mediated immediacy, for the capacity is itself mediated by a *process* of some sort. The intuitionists, however, does not think that this compromises the immediate or intuitive character of those self-warranting cognitions so necessary, from their perspective, for the justification of other cognitions.

Pragmatists are, in contrast to intuitionists, committed to the position that self-correcting practices rather than self-warranting intuitions serve as adequate grounds for our cognitive claims (cf. Rorty). From their perspective, seeing is itself a function of looking and, in turn, looking is in the relevant sense a practice, a process over which we can exert a degree of control, moreover, one that might be executed more or less well.

Pragmatists are fallibilists: they suppose that the growth of knowledge does not require infallible ground but responsible fallibility (what Peirce called “a contrite fallibilism” - a resolute willingness to confess that one is wrong and one is prone to error). The way to truth is via error, the way to knowledge is via mistakes identified and corrected. The council of the pragmatist is thus that: “Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessiveness nervousness on their behalf” (1897 [1956]: 19)

The most crucial difference between intuitionist and pragmatist in this context is made clear when we contrast the different kinds of *appeal* made by each in epistemic controversies. Intuitionists are intuitionists because when put to their trumps they appeal to intuitions and all that is revealed therein, whereas pragmatists are pragmatists because they appeal to practices and all that is

implied therein. The appeal to intuitions tends to insinuate the view that there is a vantage point outside of our historically evolved and evolving practices from which we can judge the moves made within these practices. Put another way, it fosters a sense of transcendence in an *absolute* sense.

The appeal to our historically evolved and evolving practices, however, is precisely a consciously deliberate effort³ *to make use* of the resources and correctives inherent in these practices themselves. Such an appeal takes these practices for what they have historically established themselves to be: more or less overlapping sets of self-critical and self-corrective procedures. Just because all of our practices are in some degree, however slight, self-critical and self-corrective, they are at least to that extent self-transformative.⁴ Hence, appeals to our practices are not only compatible with transcendence in a relative sense but also generative of such transcendence. We are not condemned to be what we have been. Our inherited institutions, practices, and discourses are, for all their characteristic fixity and structural invulnerability to radical transformation, self-transformative and thus self-transcending processes: we are continuously - and ineluctably - becoming otherwise than we have been. The *inherent* dynamic of human practices is such that the participants in those practices cannot but transform themselves and these practices, however slightly and unwittingly, in the course of their participation. The possibility of transformation and

transcendence does not need to be grounded in a source outside of these practices, since they are by their own inherent, dynamic constitutions self-altering processes. Rather than establishing transcendent grounds for the abstract possibility of modifying our practices, we ought (in good pragmatic fashion) to attend to the historical grounds for the concrete modifications actually taking place.

One irony (in fact, double irony) here is that intuitionism seduces us in *looking* away from what more than anything else requires painstaking examination and critical scrutiny - the changing constellation of our ever changing practices. But, before developing this point, it would be advisable to answer an objection likely to be generated by my assertion that all of our practices are in some manner and measure self-critical and self-corrective. In asserting this, have I not made matters too easy for the pragmatist? Even worse, have I not in effect sacralized what no one, especially a fallibilist (!), ought ever to sacralize, namely, the manifestly imperfect practices of manifestly fallibly, even arguably stupid, agents?

The pragmatic meaning of stupidity might be expressed in this way: the inability to learn on the part of those who are customarily supposed to possess intelligence, or on the part of those belonging to a class of beings who in general give evidence of intelligence. One does not properly call a stone stupid, though

one might meaningfully say that a human is as stupid as a stone. The reason is that a human is just the sort of being we customarily suppose *can learn*, in however limited, painful, and imperfect a manner. Given who we are and how we learn, it seems appropriate to add that stupidity is *the inability to learn from our mistakes*, just as intelligence is the ability to learn from errors. Are not human practices more often than not encrustations and indeed codifications of *stupid* strategies (ones removed from the possibility of correction)? Does not the appeal to practice thus practically mean the sanction of stupidity? Is not the intuitionist correct in supposing that there must be a court of appeal *beyond* the contingent configurations of our historical practices? Is s/he not correct in holding out for a perspective untainted by history from which to judge the inheritances, demands, and resources of our particular history? And does not our ability to carry on any one of our practices rest upon both our ability *to see* the overarching point of the practice and the quite specific pertinences, risks, and opportunities at the heart of our participation in this practice?

Lurking in the background of these questions is what John Dewey castigated as the spectator theory of knowledge. What Dewey and the other pragmatists sought to accomplish was, among other things, to usher the disengaged spectator off the stage of Western philosophy, so that a more ordinary personage (though one capable of heroism) might occupy center stage.

The pragmatic position is committed to according *implicated agents* their actual authority and competencies (the authority and ability they *actually* exhibit in their ongoing endeavors and involvements), while also committed to challenging disengaged spectators their alleged infallibility and omnicompetence. The human speaker is a paradigm of what is intended here by implicated agent, for such a speaker is implicated in an incredibly complex set of historically established practices. Any person able to speak, including speaking about or indeed against language, is always already implicated in a language. Even so, poetic utterances and everyday linguistic innovations are among the undeniable achievements of such implicated agents; beings implicated in a particular set of linguistic practices can and indeed do transform language in trivial as well as memorable ways. There is no necessity to secure for speakers a status outside of language in order to render intelligible or possible their capacity to transform their linguistic inheritance. Language is not a prison-house within which we are forever doomed to run our hands along the wall, dreaming of what is to be found on the other side; rather it is the principal means by which what is other than itself is made accessible to us. In other words, language is a medium of disclosure. That it is a medium, that it mediates between us and our world, does not preclude it from being a medium *of disclosure*.

Any human practice can be turned against itself, either in a quite restricted or in a global way. Language can be turned against language, both in the sense that one part of a particular linguistic inheritance might be used to question or discredit another part *and* in the sense that one who has mastered language might use it to abandon language altogether (think here of the mystic). So too morality can be turned against itself, politics turned against itself, science against itself, etc. For example, John Caputo's book entitled *Against Ethics* is a work in which an ethical sensibility of a readily recognizable form (a self-avowedly postmodern sensibility preoccupied with cultivating an ethos respectful of irreducible difference) is manifestly present.

The range of practices in which human beings are implicated, along with the extent to which they can both dissociate themselves from any particular practice and turn these various practices against themselves, generate the illusion that human persons in their innermost essence are dissociable beings, the essence of consciousness or subjectivity being (allegedly) the capacity to dissociate from whatever they have inherited. Over and above the actually committed, implicated self there hovers (at least in the philosophical imagination of countless philosophers) the ethereal figure of the transcendent self, an agency who possesses the capacity to negate whatever is contingently given and to transcend whatever is merely transient. This is however but the insubstantial

shadow cast by implicated agents, especially when such agents are fixated upon their constraining circumstances and unrealized aspirations. But the beginning of wisdom, at least in any recognizable human form, is the acceptance of finitude, including the limitations imposed by contingent inheritances (being born at this historical moment, being confined to this form of biological life, to this corner of cosmic space, etc.). (Cf. Dewey: “There is instinctive wisdom in the tendency of the young to ignore the limitations of the environment” [MW 14: 118]).

The appeal to practice is at once the recognition of mediation (the depth to which even our most apparently “immediate” judgments are mediated in various ways) and a reliance upon “intuition” in a straightforward sense of this highly ambiguous word.

In the course of being initiated into a practice, an agent comes to the point of *just seeing* that some considerations are impertinent, some gestures inappropriate, some procedures ineffective, etc. But these are (to use Hegel’s expression) “mediated immediacies” for they are not immediate in any absolute or unqualified sense; they are not immediate immediacies! (*innate*: immediately given with the constitution of the organism or consciousness; *intuitive* . . .). Much goes without saying. In fact, most things do. Much depends upon “seeing” just what needs to be done or said at this moment in these

circumstances. Whence comes this capacity? By what criteria are such acts of seeing judged? Who determines the angle of vision and the manner of seeing definitive of how things are to be done?

This last question makes it clear that, from the pragmatic perspective at least, the appeal to practice always carries a concern for power. Who actually holds power? In the name of what is power claimed by some participants and denied (ordinarily by the holders of power themselves) of other participants? Are means for renegotiating the distribution of power in place?

Can we see our way clear? Perhaps; but only by an ongoing, painstaking, and indeed courageous critique of the actual practices in which we are implicated and, as a result, by which we are defined. Messy, historical affairs and inheritances, in all their messiness and historicity, are *all we have to go on*. Justification does in fact come to end somewhere. To determine just where it does so requires determining where we ourselves stand, historically as well as vis-à-vis our contemporaries. This in turn requires constructing, in painstaking detail, genealogical narratives through which our contemporary practices are exhibited in their true character, as historically evolved and evolving constellations of competencies. Such narratives help us to put into play the correctives inherent in our practices and, beyond this, augmenting the critical resources within our inherited practices. Descartes' geometrical model of

epistemic justification is thereby replaced by Vico's model of narrative authorization (MacIntyre 1980: 74): within our established practices, many of our beliefs are justified by inferentially deriving these beliefs from "immediately" evident beliefs; but these practices are themselves narratively authorized by agents implicated in, and thus defined by, their initiation and involvement in these practices.⁵ In other words, the appeal to a practice cannot but be an appeal to the history of that practice. But this history is not a dead past; it is rather a structured and structuring feature of a dynamic present. The dynamism of this present is nowhere more evident than in its self-transformative and self-transcending movement. The appeal to such a history is an appeal to a historically configured, thus continuously reconfigured, community of agents whose very agency is that of densely sedimented habits. But such habits are propulsive forces driving toward an ever more adequate arena for their exercise. By virtue of these forces, our communal practices have an inherent tendency to put the community of practitioners at risk. Our very identities are, in the course of our engagement in our defining practices, called into question. Are we who claim to be pursuing truth not in our own way obscurantists? Are we who claim to be concerned with such issues as equality and justice not masking, beneath traditionally sanctioned rhetoric, our unearned privileges? Such self-doubts are constitutive of self-criticism; and self-critique is requisite for self-correction and

self-transformation.

The task of cultivating truly self-corrective practices does not depend upon an appeal to self-warranting cognitions in the traditional sense of the strong intuitionist. Our “intuitions” do not underwrite our practices but rather our practices authorize our “intuitions.” Moreover, our practices provide us with an array of tests by which the scope, applicability, and authority of our “intuitions” might be considered and reconsidered. Such a position does not commit us to doing what we have always done; nor does it collapse into an insular “we,” an unwitting relativism. What we are doing commits us to what we have not yet done. Who we are, though rooted in who we have been, commits us to who we are not yet now. Such transcendence of what we are doing and who we have been is, while finite, real and potentially ennobling.

Such at least are the “intuitions” of this pragmatist. This “intuition” is nothing more than a hunch, a hypothesis sufficiently suggestive and plausible to elicit provisional assent.

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¹ As a way of anticipating one of the main conclusions of this paper, we might recollect here MacIntyre's suggestion that: "It is only when theories are located in history, when we view the demands for justification in highly particular contexts of a historical kind, that we are freed from either dogmatism or capitulation to scepticism" (1980: 74).

² Pieper: "The Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as *ratio* and the understanding as *intellectus*. *Ratio* is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. *Intellectus*, on the other hand is the name for the understanding in so far as it is the capacity of *simplex intuitus*, of that simple vision of which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. The faculty of mind, man's knowledge, is both of these things in one, according to antiquity and the Middle Ages, simultaneously *ratio* and *intellectus*; and the process of knowing is the action of the two together" (1952: 26-7).

³ The expression "consciously deliberate effort" is not necessarily redundant for one can deliberate without being adequately conscious of the processes and strategies involved in one's own deliberation; moreover, one can also be insufficiently devoted to the task of deliberation, undertaking it in all too irregular and casual a manner. We might contrast such tendencies with a deliberately deliberate effort, wherein our deliberations encompass the manner, frequency, effectiveness, etc. of our deliberations.

⁴ This turn toward history can be called *historicism*, but this designation is likely to suggest a form of relativism (what is true, reasonable or just is relative to a specific historical moment in such a way that what is true, reasonable, or just at other times cannot, in principle, be comparatively judged, at least in ways that avoid begging normative questions). It is my position, however, that the turn toward history being advocated here does not entail a self-defeating relativism. What some feminists call "strong objectivity" requires that we take explicit account of our own subject positions, thus our own historical locations, for the purpose of detecting the biases and prejudices always already structuring perception, description, evaluation, etc. To remain oblivious to these positions and locations does not secure objectivity; quite the opposite. To render them explicit is no guarantee that they will be cease to do clandestine and debilitating work; but only by rendering them explicit are we on our guard against such work.

⁵ MacIntyre: "It is, after all Vico, and neither Descartes nor Hume, who has turned out to be in the right in approaching the relationship between history and physics" (1980: 74). If this is true of the relationship between history and physics, how much truer it is of the relationships between other disciplines, practices, institutions, and their histories.